

Meet the Rebel Commander in Syria That Assad, Russia and the U.S. All Fear; Tarkhan Batirashvili, Ethnic Chechen, Leads Group Deeply at Odds with Western-Backed Rebels in Syria

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Full text: For months, Syrian government forces hunkered down at a remote air base north of Aleppo, deftly fending off rebel assaults--until one morning a war machine rumbled out of the countryside, announcing that the Chechens had arrived.

The vehicle was notable for its primal scariness: Rebels had welded dozens of oil-drilling pipes to the sides of the armored personnel carrier, and packed it with four tons of high explosives, according to videos released online by the rebels.

It was piloted by a suicide driver, who detonated the vehicle at the base, sending a ground-shaking black cloud into the sky in an attack that analysts said finally cleared the way for rebels to storm the airfield.

The final capture of the airport in August immediately boosted the prestige of its unruly mastermind Tarkhan Batirashvili, according to analysts--an ethnic Chechen whose warring skills, learned in the U.S.-funded Georgian army, are now being put to use by a group deeply at odds with more mainstream Western-backed rebels.

The jihadi commander has recently emerged from obscurity to be the northern commander in Syria of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (ISIS), an al Qaeda-connected coalition whose thousands of Arab and foreign fighters have overrun key Syrian military bases, staged public executions and muscled aside American-backed moderate rebel groups trying to topple President Bashar al-Assad.

Conversations with Mr. Batirashvili's relatives and two of his former army commanders reveal a complex portrait of a modern jihadist from the former Soviet Union, motivated by misfortune as much as newly found religious zeal.

Born to a Christian father and Muslim mother, he served in an intelligence unit of the Georgian army before opportunities dried up at home and he left for holy war, friends and former colleagues said.

Efforts to reach Mr. Batirashvili were unsuccessful. And a website, fisyria.com, which boasts of his accomplishments, didn't respond to requests for comment.

The arrival of Mr. Batirashvili, known by his Arab nom de guerre Emir Umar al-Shishani, comes as other ethnic Chechens and Russian-speaking Islamists have for the first time responded in large numbers to the call of an international jihad in Syria.

Fighting in tightknit groups, the men have awed and repelled fellow jihadists with their military prowess and brutality, talking to one another in Russian or Chechen and to outsiders in the formal Arabic of the Quran, according to accounts of fellow rebels. Some have carved out fiefdoms inside Syria, enraging locals by collecting taxes and imposing Islamic Shariah law.

Even by the gruesome standards of the war in Syria, their rise has become notable for its unusual violence. One rebel from Russia's Dagestan, for instance, was chased out of the country after he appeared in an online video where he beheaded three locals for supporting the Syrian government, according to analysts with ties to the rebel groups. And just last week, Mr. Batirashvili's group apologized for mistakenly beheading a wounded soldier who actually turned out to be an allied rebel commander.

The prominence of the rebels on the battlefield has turned the conflict into a geopolitical struggle between the U.S. and Russia, which has long accused the West of ignoring the danger of Islamists in the troubled Chechen

region, where an insurgency has been active for decades.

While people close to Mr. Batirashvili say he views the war as a chance to strike a blow against one of the Kremlin's allies, he has also talked of his hatred of America. In a recent interview with a jihadi website, he described Americans as "the enemies of Allah and the enemies of Islam."

Until recently, Mr. Batirashvili had few outward religious convictions, former colleagues said. But like many Chechens he wanted to fight the Kremlin wherever he had the chance. "He had that kind of hatred for them," said Malkhaz Topuria, a former commander who has watched his onetime subordinate's stardom grow in videos posted on the Internet. "It was in his genes."

Moscow has mostly crushed its Islamist rebellion in the North Caucasus region, but a top Kremlin official warned last month of the new "terrorist international" in Syria, which could eventually return its focus on the mother country.

U.S. intelligence estimates that as many as 17,000 foreigners are fighting on the side of rebels in Syria. About half fight for the ISIS; of those, officials in Russia say, at least a thousand are from the country's North Caucasus and from Europe, where many Chechens have sought asylum since the collapse of the Soviet Union and hostilities in Chechnya in the 1990s.

While the Russian-speaking Islamists represent a fraction of the total rebels, many have risen to positions of power because of their history of fighting a standing army in Russia, according to analysts.

Kremlin officials say that these fighters are picking up more military experience, as well as contacts to Arab financiers who bankrolled uprisings elsewhere in the Middle East and Africa.

"One day, it's highly likely many of these fighters will return to their home republics in the Caucasus, which will clearly generate a heightened security threat to that region," said Charles Lister, analyst at IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre.

The Chechen region has come under scrutiny lately in the U.S. in the wake of this year's Boston Marathon bombing. The alleged bomber on trial, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, has roots in Chechnya and posted videos online recruiting fighters to Syria.

Mr. Batirashvili's ability to work with foreign jihadis appears to have been vital to his rise within the ISIS, which has become the main umbrella group for foreign fighters in Syria, including Saudis, Kuwaitis, Egyptians and even Chinese, according to analysts.

The ISIS, originally founded as an umbrella organization for Iraqi jihadists, views the war in Syria as a means not only to overthrow the Assad regime but a historic battleground for a larger holy war and the establishment of a larger Islamic state, Mr. Batirashvili said in an interview recently with a jihadist website.

Some of the men respond to appeals on YouTube under a generic call to fight for an Islamic state under Shariah law, according to analysts. Most fly into Turkey and then slip over the porous border into Syria, according to interviews with fellow Islamists.

Mr. Batirashvili hailed from outside Russia's borders, but hostility to Kremlin rule pulsed around him. His parents were ethnic Chechens from Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, a rugged valley that borders Chechnya that has been a traditional safe haven for fighters opposing Russia.

Mr. Batirashvili got his first exposure to the rebel spirit as a shepherd boy, living in a brick hut with no plumbing in the village of Birkiani, his father Temuri said. There, Mr. Batirashvili helped Chechen rebels cross secretly into Russia and sometimes he joined the fighters on missions against Russian-backed troops, his father said.

After high school, he joined the Georgian army and distinguished himself as master of various weaponry and maps, said Mr. Topuria, his former commander, who recruited him into a special reconnaissance group.

Russia has long accused the U.S. of irresponsibly funding the Georgian army, which it says in turn supports Islamists--a charge the Georgians and the U.S. deny.

Mr. Batirashvili was easygoing and popular with fellow soldiers and steered clear of discussing religion, though he did acknowledge his Muslim family, Mr. Topuria said.

Mr. Batirashvili rose fast in the army, being promoted to sergeant in a new intelligence unit, where his monthly salary of about \$700 was more than he had ever made in his life, his father and former commanders said. A representative for the Georgian army confirmed only the basic facts of his service in the army, declining to comment on any other activities.

When Georgian forces were ordered to attack the Russian-backed breakaway province of South Ossetia in 2008, Mr. Batirashvili was near the front line, spying on Russian tank columns and relaying their coordinates to Georgian artillery units, a former commander said. The war lasted five days.

Two years later Mr. Batirashvili's life began to unravel. He was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 2010 and confined to a military hospital for several months. When he emerged, he was deemed unfit for the military and discharged, the ministry said.

Returning home, Mr. Batirashvili was "very disillusioned," his father said. The local police force wouldn't hire him, and his mother died after having fought cancer for years.

"He was very nervous, and worried about money," a former Georgian army commander said. He said Mr. Batirashvili also appeared to be helping Islamist rebels inside Russia, and asked the former commander for help finding some military-grade maps of Chechnya.

In September 2010, Mr. Batirashvili was arrested for illegally harboring weapons, the defense ministry said, and sentenced to three years in prison.

The ministry refused to provide further details about the case.

Mr. Batirashvili's cousin Jabrail said he was released from jail after about 16 months in early 2012 and immediately left the country. "He had plenty of time to sit and think in jail about how he had been treated," his cousin said. "He served in the army in the most dangerous places, and then when he got sick they took his job and then they put him in prison."

In a recent interview with the jihadi website, Mr. Batirashvili said that prison transformed him. "I promised God that if I come out of prison alive, I'll go fight jihad for the sake of God," he said.

Though Mr. Batirashvili announced that he was headed for Istanbul, his father said it was clear he was planning to offer his services to Islamists. Members of the Chechen diaspora in the Turkish capital were ready to recruit him to lead fighters inside Syria, and an older brother had gone there months before, his father said.

"We argued about [his decision] bitterly," he said. "But he was a man with no job, no prospects. So he took the wrong path."

His former army commanders also lost contact with him, and only received word of his whereabouts this spring when Georgia's army intelligence service contacted them.

The army, they said, wanted help identifying a jihadi leader who had appeared lately in videos from Syria. The man spoke Russian with a Georgian accent, they said.

When he opened the first video, "I recognized him immediately," one of his commanders said. Mr. Batirashvili had traded in his Georgian army fatigues for a traditional South Asian shalwar kameez shirt and had grown a red beard that reached down to his chest.

But his speech, barely above a mumble, and his habit of staring at the ground as he talked were the same, he said.

In videos, Mr. Batirashvili was first identified as commander of a group calling itself Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, or "Army of Emigrants and Helpers." He called for donations, claiming jihadists finally had a chance to establish an Islamic state in the Middle East.

This summer, videos identified him as a newly named commander of the ISIS. His speeches, delivered in Russian, are distributed over a website, , which brags of his group's victories and frequently appeals for donations.

In a recent report, International Crisis Group said that Mr. Batirashvili's army has imposed extremist rule of law in areas he controls, shooting into peaceful demonstrations and detaining activists for offenses that include

nonviolent dissent and smoking cigarettes during Ramadan.

Mr. Batirashvili's father said he hasn't heard from his son for almost two years and gets news of him mostly through his older brother, who has been fighting with him in Syria. He said he doubts his son's beard was grown out of any religious conviction.

"He just switched armies, and now he's wearing a different hat," he said.

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